

## THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN LATE VICTORIAN TIMES: THE CASE OF “THE MANDRAKE VENUS”, “A WHITE NIGHT” AND “THE CITY OF BLOOD”

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### ABSTRACT

*The intensity of violence perpetrated on women can be regarded as a common denominator that ties together “The Mandrake Venus” (George Egerton), “A White Night” (Charlotte Mew) and “The Red City” (Anna Kingsford). The author’s of these stories pertain to the Victorian age, which spanned over the rule of Queen Victoria between 1837 and 1901. They introduce themselves as spokespersons of a community wherein people are fettered by forces greater than themselves. The first story is a demeaning portrayal of prostitution in a society where women are suppressed to the subservient position. They are subjected not only to the reductive ethos of the condescending male discourse, but also to the injunctions laid down by the patriarchal system at large. The anonymous heroine is displayed without a name, dignity and honor. She is referred to as the Mandrake Venus, which is concomitantly a source of attraction and repulsion. The second story is about a ‘fallen’ woman displayed on the altar of shame. The agonizing and panoptical gazes of the throng around her are meant to play havoc with her self-esteem and strip her of humanity, but, like ‘the world harlot’, in the first tale, she shows spectacular signs of resistance. The third story is a meticulous delineation of vivisection. The author establishes herself as a high profile animal rights activist denouncing the torture inflicted on animals, which resemble, in their helplessness, the disparaged female characters. Generally, this article is an attempt to look at how women are discursively constructed in a patriarchal society. The way they are represented is indicative of the power of a dominant culture to shape the world under the pretentious claim of knowing it. The analysis acquires significance by looking at the text in terms of its worldliness; that is the idea that literature cannot be separated from the political reality of the world in which it is written.*

**KEYWORDS:** Prostitution, Vivisection, Patriarchy, Counter & Hegemony

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### INTRODUCTION

The setting in which the three narratives take place is imbued with a distinctly gothic atmosphere of enclosures, imprisonments and nightmares. The stories are a lucid attempt to particularly represent the image of woman as a second sex, who is denigrated to the core. The first one describes her to be a prostitute branded as somebody trafficking in the Great Social Evil (the term used to refer to prostitution during the Victorian age). Indeed, during the Victorian era the population were coerced into abiding by rigorous moral codes and accordingly any woman who happened to have sex outside the institution of marriage was excluded as a fallen person. Consequently, she deserved callous treatment in a society where the hegemonic ascendancy of the male was well-established.

In Egerton’s story the image of the prostitute is painted in such a way as to fit one of *Ecriture Feminine*’s salient tenets. It is the one that looks at the woman as a person torn away from her own body and her own desires. Her

femininity exists only as the projection of the male gaze, which feeds on a hierarchical way of thinking grounded in a pattern of asymmetrical oppositions such as male / female; culture/nature; intelligible/ sensitive; active/ passive, etc.

Egerton's propensity to castigate the essentialist gendered perspective is celebrated in a story where a woman is relegated to the subordinated margins of humanity. She is a mere infamous resident of the house of shame which is frequented by a swarm of youngsters to abate their animalistic sexual instincts, hoping, at the same time, to eschew some deadly venereal disease.

The abominable sexuality minutely accounted for in the first tale is differently connived at by Cameron in the second. This narrator takes pleasure, not in sex, but in the sight of a young woman victim stoically standing the perturbing male gaze on the altar of shame. Her erect and defiant posture, in "A White Night", doesn't unfortunately exonerate her from being buried alive amidst an atmosphere of prayers ironically performed by the stern-looking monks and priests.

The third story, though comparatively short, is tainted with downright suffering resulting from vivisection. The portrayal of havoc and painful shrieks of beasts experimented on by the vivisectionist can be convincingly lumped with 'a husband murdering his wife' (12). The three stories, then share the common view that violence, either physical or psychological, is intolerably rife in a society where gender defines a man and a woman. This paper will hopefully address this issue and how the female character in the three stories reacts by adopting a counter-hegemonic discourse.

## PATRIARCHAL OPPRESSION AND ITS MANIFESTATIONS

Apparently, one common point that the stories shared is the female identity of their authors. These women writers' endeavor to make of the text a site wherein their sufferings, aspirations, hopes and dreams are expressed entails a tendency to voice their presence in a world mainly dominated by men. Almost one century following the birth of these tales, *The Marxist- Feminist Literature Collective* (1987) had announced at Essex University in 1977 that "Literary texts are... ideological in the sense that they cannot give us a knowledge of the social formation; but they give us... an imaginary representation of real relations " (as cited in Milner and Browitt, 2002, p. 132).

The woman writer that has so long been denied the right to have her say through the prism of forms of literary expression begins to surface in the aforementioned stories to unveil certain harsh facts surrounding the contradictory aspect of *fin de siècle*, a period of degeneration and concurrently a period of hope for regeneration. At this juncture, the New Woman as a concept became increasingly popular.

Egerton, Mew and Kingsford manage, each in her own way, to delineate a male-dominated society where women characters are assigned minor and menial roles. Their treatment of the discursive representation of misogyny finds support in the Beauvoir's (1949) philosophical conundrum of how a woman, "a free autonomous being like all human creatures... finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other" (as cited in Susan K. Foley, 1994, p. ix).

In "The Mandrake Venus" a multitude of women is merely represented as voiceless prostitutes. These fallen creatures, according to the Victorian 'grids of specification'<sup>1</sup>, are likened to serpents, the embodiment of both temptation

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this term to Michel Foucault. In his *Archeology of Knowledge*(1972) these grids refer to the systems according to which "different 'kinds of madness' are divided, contrasted, related, regrouped, classified, derived from one another as objects of psychiatric discourse" ( p.41). By means of similar grids woman has been relegated to a pariah according to the Victorian society's episteme.

and evil. They are attractive and repulsive. The pilgrim is fascinated and repelled by the sight of the Mandrake Venus. “He felt as a frog in the cage of a snake, for she was splendid in her audacity; surpassing in her beauty; white with a flabby softness of flesh, and vileness of expression that made her loathsome and as a leper”(3).

This is how the great Harlot mother is portrayed. She is appreciated and spurned for nothing but her body. The pilgrim and his companions, therefore, steadfastly press their way to pay homage to her. This act of respect for the old lady acquires meaning on the basis of the panoptical and voyeuristic gaze of the pilgrim, who describes the ‘World Harlot’ in terms laden with sexuality and danger. “She lay supinely, darting keen though languid glances through her heavy lids from eyes that burnt with somber fire, and lured as a serpent, blazed with passion and yet were called” (Ibid). This statement reveals the extent to which the patriarchal masculine discourse is capable of stripping the woman of all her human traits and reducing her to the debased level of a serpent, which is admired for its shape but always shunned because of its lethal venom. The feminist issue apparently raised in this context echoes the stereotypes the male- governed narrative has always foisted on women, such as “the femme fatal, the whore, the angel in the house, and the moral guardian of man”( Payne and Rae, 2010, p. 264). These representations and a cluster of others palpably mirror the degradation of women in life.

In the same vein, Lynda Nead (1988) has usefully argued that the 19<sup>th</sup> century definition of prostitute is characterized by its contradictory aspect. She is conceived of as an autonomous woman earning a livelihood, a no longer respectable person who trades in her body, or a diseased and disruptive victim (pp. 91, 127). The metaphorical connotation of the mandrake, as a plant fabled to be shaped like a human being, further entrenches this contradictory aspect of the prostitute; it stands for both sex and witchcraft and it can also be used as a narcotic. The multiplicity of signification attributed to the mandrake backs up Nead’s claim that prostitution in the Victorian era is a multi-layered signifier.

The intensity of Cameron’s voyeurism, as he stands idle while watching a young female victim being tortured on the altar, is also pointed out in “The Mandrake Venus” through the spectacle of the dance. The prostitutes’ work is not confined to carnal preoccupations, but also extends to entertaining the male by dint of the art of dancing to the point of exhaustion and pain. “They swept on in sinuous lines, swaying, interfacing in maddening intricacies; scattering scarlet blossoms as they danced, until their little white feet seemed to dip into the sea of blood” (4).

This sadist feeling of joy in the pain of the other sex is again reflective of the machinations of patriarchal structures in a society where the feminist trend has not yet declared the emancipation of the self. The dancers in question probably belong to the vanishing race de Beauvoir (1949) points to when she maintains that “... already some of us have never had to sense in our femininity an inconvenience or an obstacle” (27). De Beauvoir probably intends to make allusion to some historical period not much different from the one in which the events of these fictional works unfold. This is the era when the ratification of females is a common practice which succeeds in interiorizing women’s inferiority complex to effect a sort of “existential deviation” Franz Fanon (1952) deftly illustrates in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*. Through the processes of “epidermalization” and “lactification”, the black man is made to feel skeptical about his identity (p. 47).

Similarly, throughout these stories we are presented with female characters that are claimed by a sort of inertia and lethargy. Their effort to interrogate patriarchal oppression, though acknowledged by the writers, almost remains at the discursive level. Therefore, it seems that these wretched figures, as de Beauvoir famously states in the quote above, reluctantly accept their destiny of the second sex. This shows clearly in “A White Night” wherein the female heroine has defiantly, but also compliantly, fallen in the hands of her tormentors: a throng of priests and monks whose tapers and crosses testify to the human frailty and cruelty. Contemporary feminists would berate her redemptive self-sacrifice as a

cowardly act of powerless submission.

The tale, which is set in 1876 Spain, is a meticulous dramatization of evil as it emanates from those who purport to be the representation of God's will on earth. "A White Night" is ironically so murky that the petty flicker of the monks' infamous tapers is not equal to dispel the somber hue hanging around the live burial of the innocent young woman.

The hypocrisy and villainy of the so called guarantors of moral values (the monks and priests) and their invincible conviction in the sanctity of their mission evoke the ineffable plight of Nathaniel Hawthorne's protagonist in *The Scarlet letter*. Both of them are 'fallen women', according to the regimes of truth and agencies of rational thought, who is doomed to be punished for a 'wrong' they are thought to have committed. The two are also displayed in full view of the males whose voyeurism is tangible proof that the patriarchal masculinity is so entrenched that phallocentrism takes time to uproot.

"A White Night" is a horrific allegory of misogynistic silencing in which the male narrator, Cameron, inhumanely revels in the appearance of the victim on the notorious altar on which she is exposed before she is buried alive without arousing an ounce of pity in him. His description of her as she stands erect in her place betrays the same feeling of sadism embedded in the pilgrim's narrative about the Mandrake Venus, the world Harlot.

The darkest side of the tale is not the burial ceremony, but the voyeuristic [male] Cameron, a panoptical presence, a camera eye who voyeuristically watches events; he is a detached bachelor observer in the vein of Conrad's Marlow or the narrators of Henry James. The appalling apathy surrounding the narrator's account of the harrowing incident of the woman's death exacerbates the macabre shadow that envelops the tale of sorrow.

For the narrator, the female nameless figure is raised to the level of an actress on stage or fixed statue worthy of viewing to entertain the self and beguile the time away in the Spanish cloister where the company is trapped. Her situation, in his eye, is not that of a helpless victim in desperate need of commiseration before the interference of the white knight to save her from the jaws of death. She is viewed in totally different terms. The deplorable indifference of Cameron is exemplified in this extract when King pretentiously prepares himself to intervene to rescue the victim:

I held him back using the first deterrent that occurred to me, reminding him of Ella, and the notion of her danger may have hovered on the outskirts of my mind. But it was not for her at all that I was consciously concerned. I was impelled to stand aside, to force him, too, to stand aside and see it through (16).

Cameron's position, as he is absorbed in the brazen spectacle of a young woman on the brink of annihilation, can be likened to that of a viewer of a tragedy reaching its final moments. After all, missing the denouement would be an unbearable break of suspense on the part of Cameron, whose interpretation of the tragic event as a mere illusion is a shameless attempt to escape accountability. The fruitless effort of the three companions to recover the victim after burial further confirms the male's conception of woman as a worthless object to be discarded when its expiry date is over.

The thread that pieces together "The Mandrake Venus" and "A White Night" is that sensation of sexual excitation in the suffering of the other. The pilgrim's depiction of the prostitutions as a source of sex and venereal diseases and his indulgence in the sight of blood in their feet as they dance are tantamount to Cameron's voyeurism. His idea of the

prostitute as a body can be lumped in the same category as the body of the nameless figure whose burial alive is to be coldly celebrated. In both cases the body of a woman is robbed of human emotions and put on a par with any other object at the disposal of man for a temporary use.

This essentially biased portrayal of the female character in both stories is intent on denouncing the sexist cultural systems rooted in the gendered representation of woman. These systems are firstly predicated on establishing two categories, male and female. Then, they prescribe the traits by which people are subsumed within these categories, assess the categories and their traits (denigrating the female and traits conferred on females), and finally, classify the categories through a variety of cultural procedures (“such as situation, standardization, and distribution of perspective”). In the long run, these categories firmly establish the politics of dominance and subordination through the hierarchical relationship between male and female (Messer-Davidow as cited in Payne and Rae, 2010, p. 29).

A “distinctive women’s language, *parler femme*” (Irigaray as Quoted in McLeod, 2000, p. 29) is something the male figure fails to acknowledge or rather understand. For this reason, both the Mandrake Venus and the young damsel on the altar of shame are relegated to mere bodies. Ironically, the male narrators are unaware that the intricacies of the woman’s body are difficult to disentangle as Irigaray usefully points out

... Woman has sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure  
Almost everywhere... The geography of her pleasure is far more diversified,  
More multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle than commonly  
Imagined... (Ibid, p. 28)

The binary oppositions that are fundamental to the structures of symbolic language are what the above quote seeks to dismantle.

The third story in this paper strives to analyze is not so much grounded in the logic of asymmetrical duality upon which the first two hinge. However, a close reading of the text will certainly reveal the existence of a common core among the three. “The Red City” also revolves around the intensity of oppression exercised by man. In Anna Kingsford’s short narrative, the perpetrator of pain is the “vivisectionist”, who is responsible for the torture of a lot of animals for the sake of medical science. The animals experimented on without the use of anesthetics is compelled to stand the excruciating agony inflicted upon them in the Laboratory. They resemble, in their silence and moans of pain, the silence of the woman on the altar as she awaits her final doom.

The atmosphere surrounding the movement of the plot is ominous and portends that some disaster is underway. It “was dense and obscure and the time seemed that of twilight... I could not discern the sun, moon, or stars or color of any kind. All was gray, impenetrable, and dim...” (20). the gothic aspect of the story is accentuated by virtue of the obscurity and lifelessness of the setting. Like “The Mandrake Venus” and “A White Night”, no room is offered for light since the events recounted suggest otherwise.

The intimidating silence that permeates the narrative, indeed a dream, is intermittently broken by “a low creeping sound like subdued moaning”. The sound reflects “the in tensest physical suffering” (20). The narrator’s dream extends in scope to include a series of houses bordering a desolate street. They look much more like prisons than normal human abodes and are the theatre of inexorable suffering and torture exerted either on animals or people. In one of the early parts

of the dream, the narrator relates the following:

Looking steadfastly towards one of the houses from which the most distinct  
Of these sounds issued, I perceived a stream of blood slowly oozing out from  
Beneath the door and trickling down into the street, staining the tufts of grass  
Red here and there, as it wound its way towards me. (20).

Unlike the voyeuristic tone of the previously studied stories, “The Red Knight”, though a mere dream, denounces the brutality of the vivisectionist’s practice. The female narrator, unlike her male counterparts, is not a detached observer claimed by apathy and lack of concern for the bloodshed she beholds everywhere in the wretched street. She doesn’t seem to connive at the cruelty of the vivisectionist; she feels it is her onus as a human being to interfere with the hope of changing the situation. Her persistence in “rescuing the victim animals” is evident in her words: “In vain I searched for bell or knocker or for some means of making entry into the house... my beat madly against the door with my hands and shrieked for help; but in vain. My dress was reddened with the blood upon the doorstep (20).

The fact that the story takes on the form of a dream<sup>2</sup> further supports the view that the female narrator is more human than both the pilgrim, Cameron and those ostensibly devout religious figures whose ‘piety’ is a bulwark against all sorts ‘evil’. The woman on the altar therefore, for some ‘mischief’ she may have done, deserves no better verdict than to be buried alive (the figurative dimension of this flagrant image is not underestimated since this burial also connotes the incarceration of women in the grinding domestic sphere). This act of barbarity and savagery, which doesn’t affect Cameron nor pushes him to take a practical action in an attempt to alter the course of events, echoes the work of the vivisectionist in “The red City” and the stereotypical discursive representation of the “Mandrake Venus”

All in all, the patriarchal masculinity accounted for in the three stories is obvious. The prostitutions are represented as sexual objects that are liable to infect a lad or pilgrim with a deadly disease. They don’t fit in the paradigm prescribed by the 19<sup>th</sup> century sexual apparatus within which “ individuals do not interest the state primarily as owners of property, or citizens, or even, finally as productive workers, but as emotionally stable subjects capable of strong interpersonal relations – that is, capable of domestic stability and love” (During, 1992, pp. 168-69). The victim young woman is displayed on the altar under the stinging gaze of the monks and priests and the poor animals are subjected to the painful experiments of the vivisectionist. Nonetheless, a scrupulous analysis of the language shows that some counter-hegemonic discourse is embedded in the interstices of the words.

## THE IMPLICATIONS OF WOMAN’S RESISTANCE

Though the female characters delineated in the three narratives are more or less silenced and assigned a demeaning role, such as that of a prostitute or culprit, they, somehow or other, contest the patriarchal power of the male narrator. In other words, they strive to work their way out of the maze of male-defined patriarchal structures and ideologies in which they are walled up. In “The Mandrake Venus”, for instance, the experienced prostitute, depicted in derogatory terms, has the ability to counterattack the excessive promiscuity of the youth who drop in to entertain a fleeting moment of

<sup>2</sup> The influence of Sigmund Freud’s concept of the unconscious on the writer is palpable. For Freud, the ego is not master in its own house since the road to reality is through parapraxes such as dreams, jokes, slips of the tongue, puns, etc. They are regarded as compromise formations, the outcome of the conflict between conscious intentions and repressed feelings or impulses.

sexual pleasure.

The prostitutes provide sex, but can also transmit a deadly disease. The pilgrims who come to enjoy their time in the company of these ‘whores’ are in constant fear of contracting a fatal disease. This being the case, they quit the brothel with extreme fear that turns their short-lived pleasure into a nightmarish tormenting experience. The mandrake’s debased social position is compensated for by her capability to infect those lascivious lads with a disease that will ruin their life and therefore put an end to their male arrogance.

The Mandrake’s house stands the pernicious effect of time; it shows such a spectacular resistance and develops a strong immunity that makes it firmly fixed in its place. “Nations change, creeds rise and die; the house of the mandrake Venus is alone invincible” (5). When the narrator puts her on a par with the serpent with the intention of displacing her, he also unconsciously accentuates her potential to resist and attack those who come nigh. Her venom is a lethal weapon that will defend her against the enemy and allow her a chance to outlive him. The Mandrake, like the serpent, has been endowed with an unflinching brand of power that has thrown into question that of the male. When the narrator gives her a voice, she surprises him in the following terms:

No power has yet been strong enough to break our reign; we are the greatest

World sore, the serpent coiled round the homesteads of men. Your wise men

Say we are the victims necessary to your perfected system of humans

The relationship I know; I only suffer, and sow the flower of revenge, and death,

And downfall in the youth of mankind (5).

The kingdom of the Mandrake has an aura of power around it and is obviously unconquerable. More than that, it has the potential, like a snake, to wreak havoc on those who dare set foot in its precincts.

In like manner, the defamation of the nameless young woman in “A White Night” does not occur in a space devoid of resistance. Conversely, the disparaged woman does not humbly succumb to her fate. The private space wherein she staunchly stands upright is analogous to the trench where a soldier intrepidly defends himself against the enemy’s shellfire until death seizes him.

She is extraordinarily undaunted by the gazes of the monks and priests surrounding her on all sides. She is indifferent to their tapers and hypocritical prayers. Her erect position on the altar lays bare her bravery and the evil of her tormentors. Through her desolate situation we come to realize what it is like for a woman to live in a radical patriarchal society, where she is treated as male’s irrational other.

The atmosphere surrounding her description is enveloped in thick darkness which makes us easily detect the ironic tone embedded in the title. The only ray of light does not stem from the tapers held by the monks, but from the private space occupied by the woman. “A figure, white and slight, erect- a woman’s figure” is preceded by “two priests in surplices... And on the whole impassive company her presence, her disturbance, makes no mark. For them, in fact, she wasn’t there” (5)

The dichotomy of presence/ absence is catapulted to the foreground. The priests negate the woman; they efface her; the place where she stands is a blank spot. On the other hand, contrary to the religious figures’ expectation, she is fully

aware of her presence. This will probably sap the ramifications of Cameron's voyeurism. While the narrator exults in the commodification of the woman, he falls into a kind of semantic slippage- in fact a notorious blind spot or aporia - which imparts legitimacy to her existence. "She wasn't altogether real", Cameron points out, "she didn't altogether live, and yet her presence there was the supreme reality of the unreal scene, and lent to it, at least as I was viewing it, it's the only element of life" (12).

Cameron's intense voyeurism hides a kind of recognition of the victim's presence. She is the one who is devoted a sheer amount of the narrative and her face is revealed in close-up unlike the multitude of viewers who are dramatized in an extreme long shot, which makes them look petty in front of the convicted bride. "She screams" that subsequently subside into "little cries or moans" can be construed beyond mere deplorable voyeurism. In fact, they represent the tangible index of the callousness of the patriarchal masculinity incarnated by the monks and priests. "A White Night" echoes the 'second wave feminists' conception of patriarchal representation of woman: "They perceived women's oppression as having cultural, rather than biological roots, and in part... they saw women's cultural production as central to "consciousness raising and hence to social change" (McLeod, 1992, p. 129).

This brutality intensifies in such a way as to target not only humans but also animals. In "The City of Blood", the excruciating abuse of scores of animals is a mere product of a dream recounted by a female narrator whose aversion to the terror exerted on the innocent beasts are obvious. She painstakingly traces the source of streams of blood "oozing out from beneath the door" to the vivisectionist's Laboratory.

The reference to the abundance of blood again implies that where there is a male there is chaos. Pitting the dream against the reality on the ground bears witness to the narrator's intention to lay bare the workings of a patriarchal system deeply rooted in the nexus of society. The narrator's genuine remonstrance about the barbarity of the vivisectionist's practice (unlike King and Cameron's cold-bloodedness as they stand aside relishing the suffering of a human being) testifies to her fervent determination to alter the bloody situation. What is particularly worth noting about the form of resistance she embraces is the narrator's ability to combine a feeling of sensitivity and a propensity for action. She cannot resist the sight of the streets strewn with innocent blood of tortured animals, let alone the sight of a live burial of a defiant helpless woman. Her serious attempt to address the bloody affair comes to the fore when "[she]" beats madly against the door with [her] hands and shrieked for help; but in vain. [Her] dress was reddened with the blood upon the doorstep (20). The fact that her dress is stained with blood is a concrete proof that she is actually involved in the revolutionary act; unfortunately, her assiduous effort comes to no fruition.

In a nutshell, the three stories are built upon the masculine oppressive and repressive exploitation not only of women but also of animals. Nevertheless, the female subject is not entirely passive; her unflinching tendency to resist the male-generated discourse is patently detectable in "The Mandrake Venus" and "A White Night" and manifestly accounted for in "The red City", in which the female narrator interferes, though unsuccessfully, to set free the animals trapped in the Vivisectionist's Prison.

## CONCLUSIONS

"The Mandrake Venus", "A white Night" and "The Red City" are all about woman's wrestle with the sexist cultural system sponsored by patriarchy. The portrayal of the feminine voice in the three literary works is an attempt to analyze forms of ethical and epistemological discourse in a society where patriarchy gains momentum. Egerton, Mew and



Kingston remarkably succeed in painting a masculine image of *fin- de- siècle* woman. The ramshackle and claustrophobic space assigned to her within the confines of the society justifies that she has not yet attained the status of Xavière in Simone de Beauvoir's first novel *L'invitée* (*She Came to Stay*). The female characters and narrators in the stories at hand dare not repeat her words, which run as follows: “I hate those compromises. If one can't have the sort of life one wants, one might as well be dead” (p. 27)

Be that as it may, a close reading of the narratives will probably reveal that the females' living conditions within the boundaries of a male- dominated society is not altogether devoid of signs of spectacular resistance. This aura of counter-hegemonic discourse takes on two variant forms. It is latent in the case of the “world Harlot”, whose position as a diseased prostitute makes her able to avenge herself upon “the children of mankind” and in the case of the victim who overlooks the male gaze as she stands erect on the altar a waiting to meet her doom. On the other hand, it is manifest in “The Red City”, wherein the female narrator's endeavor to break into the vivisectionist laboratory to release the animals translates her tendency to eschew bad faith.

The writers of the stories, though their characters cannot let go of bad faith, have managed to set the scene for more sophisticated feminist writings which celebrates the woman's existence. Nathalie Sarraute's (1974) comment almost a century after these stories sprang into life shows that women can strongly question the assumptions taken for granted by the sexist cultural systems. She usefully argues that

at the level at which the inner dramas that I try to show are produced I am  
convinced that there is no difference between men and women, as there is  
no difference in their respiratory or blood systems ( as cited in Sage, 1992, p.  
23).

Her conception of the world chimes in with Sartre's own ideas: she is averse to all essentials; she shows the objection to clearly defined characters or emotions and ready-made notions. Gender is anathema to her as a writer: “I think that these distinctions are based on prejudices, on pure convention...” (Sarraute as cited in Sage, 1992, p. 23). She is somehow right since to define is ultimately to confine and to deny growth and change. In this respect Murdoch acknowledges

The force of Sartre's argument that human nature must give way to the  
Humanitarian situation; and those we must struggle to choose ourselves  
Continuously- even bad faith (unreflective acceptance of traditional codes,  
Settling into spurious definitions of one's character, acting a commitment)  
Infects almost every choice (as cited in Sage, 1992, p. 4).

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